

**RACISM:**

**A**

**TARNISHED**

**REFLECTION**

**OF**

**OURSELVES**



***A Pastoral letter by***

***Bishop James A. Griffin***

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# **RACISM: A TARNISHED REFLECTION OF OURSELVES**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus:

I want to write to you about something which I believe disfigures the face of society, the Church and individuals: racism.

## **A. Racism in Society**

Recent events in our world, our country, and our local community remind us that, despite our efforts and our progress, racism remains with us. This is true in spite of some advances over the last three or four decades to correct this unjust situation. We still see racism in inferior schooling for minority children, discriminatory treatment toward minority workers, and the unfair practices of business and industry. We hear it in racial slurs, belittling references to minorities, and outright insults directed to persons because of their race.

Racism is a serious sin. It is a refusal to accept God's creative plan--that all human beings are made in His image and likeness, that all persons have the same heavenly Father, regardless of their race or nationality. The teaching of Jesus Christ, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," is intended to be inclusive, extending even to those whom we reject because of their ethnic or racial differences (see Lk 10:25-37). The Catholic Church proclaims that all races are children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. In doing this, She remains true to Gospel faith and Christian tradition.

This Gospel truth is echoed in our country's Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." This basic principle is spelled out in the Constitution and in repeated legislative enactments over the past two hundred years. We can rightly say that racism is un-American and contrary to the laws of our nation. We must recognize that overt acts of racism are criminal.

We are all responsible for our society. We must each contribute in our own way to the molding of the society of which we are a part. We must also ensure the rights of all other members of society to do the same. Only when all people are free to influence the development of culture and society can that society become everything it can be and which we want it to be for the sake of the common good, for our own sakes, and for future generations.

Blatant forms of racist practices can be readily known and condemned. It is the subtle forms that elude our perception. Before public acts occur, racism resides in the mind and heart. Prejudicial attitudes and feelings exist which at times are not so easily recognized. These can give rise to racist talk and racist activities, and ultimately to racist practices throughout our society.

Racism flows from personal attitudes and actions into the human world around us; it becomes a social evil. Our social institutions and structures are affected. None seem to escape: families and schools, public institutions and governmental programs, large corporations and small businesses, even our own church communities. As

responsible members of our society, we are obliged to do our part to eradicate racism from this society--from the whole and from each of its component parts.

## B. Racism in the Church

As a Church, we must examine and confront the subtle forms of racism of which we are guilty. The Catholic Church in the United States is an overwhelmingly white Church. As the Bishops' Committee on Black Catholics stated, "History reveals that racism has played a powerful role in discouraging African-Americans from the Catholic Church as a spiritual home." It is therefore vitally important that predominately white parishes learn to worship and live as open invitations to people of all races. We need to change our hospitality habits in order to become a true gathering of believers. We must face the challenge of liberating ourselves from the bonds of racism. Racism, as a sin, harms not only the victim but the sinner, too. We are held bound by our prejudices and our fears of letting go of control and power. Perhaps racism does not register as a "sin" in "my parish"--but it can be present. We must name and confess our prejudices in order to be freed from them. How does your parish welcome the stranger and celebrate diversity?

Those reading this letter who are Catholic must remember that we find our unity with Christ and one another in the Eucharist. Each time I distribute Holy Communion to various congregations around the diocese, I am made aware of our unity in diversity. The faces of those receiving Christ are of all colors, and yet all hunger after the same Lord. In this hunger is the key to our unity.

## C. Racism's Personal Roots

If we are to remove the sin and crime of racism from our midst, we must start with the self. All social sin begins in the choices of individuals to be unjust, and is sustained by our blindness to those initial choices. As St. John says, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves." We can say the same thing about prejudices: we all have them, though we may never have faced them honestly.

In order to overcome this blindness, I ask each of you to make a personal review of any prejudices you might hold. To confront our prejudices, we need to conduct a rigorous self-examination of our attitudes. With the teaching of the Church on human dignity as our "compass," we also need another tool, a mirror, in which to examine ourselves. I would suggest that every individual ask himself/herself the following questions as a kind of "morality mirror" in which to see his or her own prejudices:

What prejudices do I now have? Can I identify the sources of those prejudices?

What prejudices have I taken from my family and home life?

What prejudices have I formed or accepted as a result of my experiences in life? or from the media?

How do my prejudices manifest themselves in my everyday living?

How would I feel were I confronted by people who hold the same prejudices about me that I do about others?

What one action can I take to begin to combat or remove the major prejudices in my life?

What further action can I take to work on behalf of victims of racism, whether they be children, young people, or adults?

This aspect of taking concrete action is especially important; if we can convince ourselves, and others, to act as if we truly believe in the equality and dignity of every person of every race, we will find that this action will change our belief. Consistently acting in a certain way begins to form beliefs--or, as may be the case, to "reform" beliefs--and changing our beliefs reforms our behavior.

Personal conversion and pastoral charity are necessary, but this conversion from prejudice must be linked to a sharing of power and influence with minority people. In this move to share power and influence, citizens in the majority race signal that racism is not to be tolerated. We cannot let economic fears deter us from acting justly. We cannot cling to power and control when doing so results in the perpetuation of racism and oppression.

In closing, I want to address and challenge specific groups of citizens:

To parents: I remind you that you are the first and best teachers of your children. By word, but even more by example, you form their moral intelligence. Be sure that respect for all sisters and brothers is part of the framework of your teaching. Seek ways to provide your children with positive experiences of many ethnic groups.

To religious leaders: Be that prophetic voice to challenge the consciences and actions of your people on this issue of racism. Ask them to reflect seriously on what it means to be sisters and brothers, children of God. Pinpoint the real issues that your parish or congregation must address regarding racism.

To government officials and community leaders: Do not allow the ugly head of racism to arise in our community. Above all, do not allow members of your staff to “trade” on this issue of racism for political gain.

To business leaders: The “bottom line” cannot be the sole criterion of your profession. Business must be guided by ethics and principles, chief among which must be respect for every individual, regardless of race, and opportunity for every employee to rise to his or her full potential with no limits or exclusionary practices based on race.

To teachers: You mold the future of our community. You have the best chance to eradicate the roots of racism from families and communities. You have the opportunity to plant the seeds of racial fairness in the hearts of our children. Please make the most of this opportunity.

To all men and women of good will: The value of each of us is dependent on the value which we place on others. Once we make or allow the judgment that any other is expendable or to be limited in opportunity because of race, we open the door to the same fate befalling ourselves based on the same or other irrational criteria. Let us defend our own human dignity by defending the human dignity of every one of our sisters and brothers. Among other things, this means adopting

an attitude of “zero tolerance” of racist comments or activity taking place, even when you are not directly involved or affected. Do not turn your back in indifference, or seek to take the easy way out.

To write of our shortcomings and to confess our failures is never easy or attractive, but this is the only way to face and eradicate racism in our midst. In this Easter Season, I ask you to join me in prayer, reflection, and action. I also ask you to carry with you and often refer to the “Morality Mirror” on this subject of racism which accompanies this letter. I close by reminding you of the final words of the pastoral letter on racism issued by the United States bishops in 1979. These same words were quoted in our subsequent pastoral, “For the Love of One Another” (1984):

“There must be no turning back along the road of justice, no sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solutions from another age. For we are children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all his brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.”

+JAMES A. GRIFFIN  
Bishop of Columbus



## Morality Mirror

Loving God, open my mind to prayerfully and honestly examine my own attitudes and actions, and open my heart to your grace moving me to repentance and change.

What prejudices do I now have? Can I identify the sources of those prejudices?

What Prejudices have I taken from my family and home life?

What prejudices have I formed or accepted as a result of my experiences in life? or from the media?

How do my prejudices manifest themselves in my everyday living?

How would I feel were I confronted by people who hold the same prejudices about me that I do about others?

What one action can I take today to begin to combat or remove the major prejudices of my life?

What further action can I take to work on behalf of victims of racism, whether they be children, young people, or adults?

God of every people, nation, race, and tongue, I sincerely repent of every thought, word, or deed in which I have failed to acknowledge any and every other member of the human race as my brother or sister. Help me to change, for only your grace can melt the hardness of my heart and bring down the walls that prejudice raises between peoples. May your Spirit strengthen me to show your universal love in concrete actions in every aspect of my life, public and private. Amen.